DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 220 PS 028 226

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TITLE Language Flowering, Language Empowering for Young Children.
PUB DATE 1999-11-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (New Orleans, LA, November 15-18, 1999).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Caregiver Child Relationship; *Caregiver Speech; *Child Language; Early Childhood Education; Empowerment; *Language Acquisition; Learning Activities; Linguistic Input; *Young Children

ABSTRACT

Based upon the view that parents, home visitors, and teachers in early childhood settings need tools for empowering young children to develop language, this paper examines what adults need to know to guide young children's language development and presents 20 suggestions for enhancing language growth. The paper maintains that adults need to know the norms and windows of language growth, need strong research findings to defend developmentally appropriate practice, need to consider how language skills are special socially, and need helpful curriculum ideas to enhance and promote language competence and prevent school reading failures. The techniques detailed for caregivers, parents, and home visitors are the following: (1) offer turn-taking talk with babies; (2) provide prompts; (3) be a generous word giver; (4) model and expand on infant/toddler language; (5) use parallel talk; (6) use self talk; (7) arrange for children to act out familiar tales; (8) encourage children to create rhymes; (9) converse frequently with children; (10) teach children to give themselves verbal planning cues; (11) use convergent questions to find out what children know; (12) use Socratic questions to encourage reasoning and creativity; (13) restate meanings in simple words; (14) read books; (15) sing; (16) enliven spontaneous dramatic play; (17) help children use words as social mediators; (18) teach time, space, and number words; (19) recite poetry; and (20) teach finger plays and chants. The paper concludes by noting that providing language mastery experiences will ensure that children become language lovers as well as eloquent language learners. Contains 25 references. (KB)

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LANGUAGE FLOWERING, LANGUAGE EMPOWERING FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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Parents, home visitors, and teachers in early childhood settings need tools for empowering young children to flourish in many domains. The domain of language development is fundamentally critical to later school success, social ease, and abstract thinking skills. To be wise mentors who use teaching tools and techniques well, we need understandings and insights about developmental progressions in each special child development area.

In some USA communities, as many as 45% of youngsters are "failing" kindergarten because their pre-reading language skills are not at a level that can prepare them for successful beginning reading in first grade. Also, some low-income, low-education parents need far more help if they are to provide support for their children's early school success (Payne, Whitehurst, & Angell, 1994). Such outreach supports are in rare supply. Yet, preschool teachers are gatekeepers into the rich territories of literacy. They need to expand their concern and expertise to families. Together the adults serve as primary guides who introduce children to the delights, byways, signposts, and fruitful gardens of the land of language learning.

What Do We Need To Know?

First, we need to know the norms and windows of language growth (Honig, 1989). How do language and competence in reading and writing grow from the infant/toddler period through the early school age period? Knowledge of the normative stages of language development grounds our work (Cazden, 1981; Harris, 1990; Honig, 1983). For example, "holophrasis", or one-word speech, appears somewhere near the end of the first year, amid baby jargon and babbling sounds with intonations. Two-word or "telegraphic speech" ("Want dat!"; "Doggie dere"; "My toy!"; "Daddy fix"; "Big moo-moo") usually comes in before 24 months. The ability to form adult negatives ("I don't want meatballs" rather than " No me want dat"

[1] Workshop presented at the annual meetings of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. New Orleans, November, 1999.

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and to form full questions ("How do I draw that, teacher?") appear during the third year. During the later preschool years, children learn to interpret passive questions ("Was the car hit by the truck?") and to decode and answer "Why?" questions accurately.

Some children find coordinating their tongue, lips, palate and other language production parts harder, while others have an easier time, even with consonant clusters, such as "str" in "street". As for pronunciation, usually, by four years of age, about 3/4 of child articulation is clear and intelligible.

Second, we need strong research "ammunition" to defend our developmentally appropriate practices (Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties, 1997). Researches illuminate the quality of early support for literacy that caregivers and parents must provide to boost young children's language learning. Moerk, Snow, Tizard, Berko-Gleason (1997), McQueen & Washington, the deVilliers and many other researchers help us appreciate how adults facilitate and promote early passions for communication in turn-taking talk and conversations, passion for stories, and skills for spelling, writing, and reading (Greenberg, 1998).

Third, we need to consider how language skills are special socially for making friends and getting along well. Promoting early language competency during the infancy years could even serve to lesson the probability of harsh discipline with children. Families may be more frustrated and stressed in interactions with children who have receptive and expressive language delays. With teacher support for early child language skills and support for family language enrichment games with young children (Honig, 1982) some folks may then find it more appropriate to discipline with words rather than physical force.

Prisons are filled with adults who never learned to read or to read only at rudimentary levels. Thus, a fourth major emphasis must be on helpful curriculum ideas to enhance and promote early language competence from early infancy, onward and to preventing school reading failures. (Fowler, 1990; Honig, 1982; McCabe, 1992; Van Allen & Van Allen, 1982).

Girded with ideas, techniques, and reading materials, adults can effectively implement a language-rich curriculum to boost early literacy and motivation for early reading activities. More children will be likely to read fluently and read for pleasure in elementary grades. When networks of parents and professionals - caregivers, teachers, home visitors, and speech therapists - work together, then young children have even greater chances for early language flowering. Effective teachers capitalize on the strengths and unique learning styles of each child, their special story interests, and their oral fluency, to engage each youngster in book learning and book loving.

TECHNIQUES FOR CAREGIVERS, PARENTS, AND HOME VISITORS

1. Offer Turn-taking Talk With Babies.

As you tenderly carry out daily routines with infants, verbally and responsively in "turn-taking talk" express your pleasure for their cooing and babbling with you (Devine, 1991; Honig, 1985).

2. Provide Prompts.

Adults create early verbal scaffolding for emerging language (Bruner, 1983). Be particularly aware of the level at which a child is functioning. Some children use multi-word sentences clearly by age 2. Others exhibit many articulatory substitutions ("bunny wabbit" "shishy", "lellow" [for yellow], "dar" [for car]) and communicate mostly with two-word phrases. Tuned-in teaching adults know just how to lure little ones forward into further language competence by working in what Vygotsky called the "Zone of Proximal Development"(Bruner, 1984). With a teacher's insightful support, a child reaches further understandings and learns more.

As you care for and talk with a child under-three, provide pauses to entice little ones to "finish" your phrases:

. Mary had a little ----.
. You need your toothbrush to brush your----.
. I know a little grey mouse. He lives in a little grey------.
. We go see saw up and down . We go up and -------.
. Baa baa, black sheep have you any ----?
. Row row row your -----.
. First we put on your socks; then we put on your ....

3. Be A Generous Word Giver.

Label objects, actions, feelings, facial emotions, and events. If a toddler is now walking alone pretty well, exclaim admiringly: "You are walking, really getting up and walking now. You must be so proud of yourself!"

Use encouraging words and specific praise for new accomplishments, as when baby uses a spoon in self-feeding or wrinkles her nose to "sniff" a flower. When toddlers eagerly point out a barking doggy walking beyond the playyard gate, affirm cheerfully, "That doggy is going woof, woof woof. Doggy is walking right by our yard!"

"The gerbil is twitching his whiskers" confirms for your preschoolers just what the animal is doing as each child reaches out to pet the gerbil gently. Your naming of events and things

anchors reality in words and increases a young' child's power to use linguistic symbols. How triumphant a four-year-old on a museum trip feels as he looks up at the huge skeleton and informs you "That's Tyrannosaurus Rex!"

When your toddlers and preschoolers are very sure of a label, play silly games on occasion. For example, hold up a green checker and say "Is this purple?" Or pat a child's knee and say I'm patting your elbow!" Preschoolers love to catch a teacher making an absurd mistake once in a while!

4. Model And Expand On Infant/Toddler Language.

Suppose a baby in bathtub exclaims "Wawa". Then cheerfully confirm: Yes, that's water in your tub. You go splish splash in the water. ·You go swimmy swim in the water" . All this while you "swim" the baby while holding her under her tummy. Suppose an infant says "Ju!" Father then asserts: " You're right! Juice. Orange juice. You love to drink orange juice, honey". Such tiny tidbits of language interactions expand and enrich an infant's language world.

5. Use Parallel Talk.

Provide words to accompany child gestures (Honig, 1989). For example, as your 8-month-olds vigorously respond to music with their bodies, rejoice with them and exclaim "You really like bouncing up and down to the music! Bounce, bounce bounce."

Your words describe what is going on, what children are doing or feeling. During parent group meetings, encourage family members to provide words for whatever they see their infant or toddler doing or trying to do. As a preschooler fills her pail with wooden beads, say clearly "You are filling up the tub with those wooden beads. You are piling up the wooden beads in your tub."

If a child is lugging a basket of blocks, exclaim "Those blocks sure are heavy to carry. The basket feels so heavy!" Keep on using parallel talk during outdoor playtime as well as indoors. "You are taking turns climbing up the stairs of the slide" gives word power and reminds children of playground rules.

6. Use Self Talk.

Talk about what you are doing for a child or for the group and how your are doing it: "I am setting out a large piece of collage paper for every child. Now I will give you some pieces to paste on your collage paper. Here are some sprinkly glittery letters for you, Jo. Here are some tiny aluminum foil shapes, Kwanghee. You decide how you want them to go as you paste them down on your collage paper."

This principle is especially important in working with infants. For example, "I need to go get some clean diapers. So I'll carry you over to the diaper supply box. Here we go walking over to get some clean diapers." As you reach to get a jar of baby food down for a meal, say "I am getting down some yum yum applesauce for your lunch."

7. Arrange For Children To Act Out Familiar Tales.

Once preschoolers become deeply comfortable with a well-known story, such as "Goldilocks and the three bears" or "The three Billy Goats Gruff", then they will be ready to act out the characters. Toddlers with few words can use pantomime at first to act out the characters. Sometimes children want to act out violent behaviors of favorite TV show characters, such as Ninja Turtles. How can you keep your classroom peaceful and yet encourage dramatic story acting? Perhaps at circle time you can have a dialogue with your preschoolers about what kinds of stories are safe to act out in the class and which ones are more likely to end in someone feeling hurt or getting hurt.

8. Encourage Children To Create Easy, Funny Rhymes.

Language can be playful and fun, and a vehicle for creativity if children are encouraged to be imaginative. At circle time, challenge children to chime in with a rhyme:

I like my cat; she's not skinny or FLAT,
But she is round and FAT;
She likes baseball and a BAT;
She wears a jacket and a HAT;
She doesn't like me to yell "SCAT!";
She curls up on her MAT;
She's not a BAT or a RAT;
She never acts like a Brat;
Now, what do you think of THAT!

Each preschooler can contribute a rhyme to add to the giggles. Sometimes their rhymes will be silly sounds but not "real words". Perhaps that is why children delight particularly in Dr. Seuss books that emphasize humorous rhymes: "McGrew Zoo" or "Star Bellied Sneetches" or "Yertle the Turtle". Humor enhances language pleasure (Honig, 1988). Even babies rhyme to themselves in their cribs.

9. Converse Frequently With Children.

Talk with children individually as well as in group time all through the day during classroom and childcare routines and especially during snack and meal times (Honig & Brophy, 1997). Even with babies, act as if their strings of babbles have real meaning and are important communications genuinely interesting to you.

10. Teach Children To Give Themselves Verbal Planning Cues.

Language has an executive function. Children can use words to guide their own behaviors and to reflect on their plans and actions (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). When there are social scuffles, encourage future-oriented thinking and divergent thinking by asking "What else can you think of to try?" What verbal cues might help a child remembers his promise to give the tricycle to a friend with whom he is "taking turns" ?

Verbal rehearsal is important. In the wooden blocks and train track corner, children need to go over plans to proceed in building train tracks and bridges together with peers. What materials will a group of preschoolers need to gather? How are they planning on sharing the different jobs to be done while creating together a long mural about sea activities, including sailing boats, sea turtles, sharks, coral, and fishes?

Teach babies and toddlers self-control words. Some murmur to themselves "No touch dat", as they reach toward something forbidden, such as a sugar bowl on a table, and then draw the hand back.

11. Use Convergent Questions to Find Out What Children Know.

Research reveals that over 80% of teacher questions to toddlers are convergent. These "closed" questions of course help us find out exactly what children do know or have learned. Such questions are answered with either a "Yes" or "No" answer or just one correct answer (Honig, 1983). "How many bananas does the monkey eat all together if he eats two bananas from this basket and then eats one more banana from the other basket?" "What do we call the house that a birdie lives in?" "Do you have to go potty?" is probably a frequent convergent question of toddler teachers!

12. Use Socratic questions To Encourage Reasoning and Creativity.

Asking Socratic, open ended questions is a powerful technique by which adults can stimulate children's thinking as well as show genuine respect for their reasoning abilities. Socratic questions are tools to help children "distance" from concrete experiences (to use Siegel's term) and they encourage more abstract thinking (Blank, 1973).

The brain develops amazingly rapidly during the first years of life. Socratic questions help grow brain connections as children are challenged to think up answers!

Socratic questions encourage choices, promote children's recall from memory, sharpen observation skills, and encourage planning and if-then syllogistic reasoning skills:

. " What could you do with a paper towel roll when all the towels are used up?
. "Why is it a good idea to eat soup with a spoon and not a fork?"
. "How could you comfort a baby who is crying."
. "What stuff would you need to gather together if you wanted to bake cookies?"
. "Which of my two pencils is longer? How could I find out which of these two pencils is longer; tell me how I can do that?"
. "I know you really wish you could have that toy right now. Jamie is using it. What will happen next if you grab that toy from Jamie? How will he feel? What do you think he will do then? What is our classroom rule about sharing?"
. " How come in this picture (of a tropical storm) all the trees seem to be bending down and swaying back and forth? What do you think is making that happen?"
. "The cooked chocolate pudding looks so thick and creamy. Can you remember how it looked before we started cooking? How did it look when we opened the package?"
. "What do you like best to spread on top of your pancakes"

Challenge yourself to create more Socratic questions every day!

13. Restate Meanings in Simple Words.

Children are sometimes puzzled by our explanations or our requests. If children look puzzled by what you are saying, then repeat and vary your words so that the children are sure to catch your meaning. In turn, listen carefully for child meanings and puzzlements, worries and wonders. Preschoolers who ask "Why" questions a lot may be struggling to understand a difficult concept. Your creative skills help you to formulate simple yet satisfying explanations.

14. Read Books Galore!

Muster up all your dramatic flair as you turn the pages sharing pictures of barn animals with babies. Teach book skills to babies: how to turn pages, how to point to and label animals and make their sounds; how to chime in with repetitive words in a book where the same chorus or words turn up over and over again. (think of "Horton Hatches an Egg", for example: "An elephant's faithful 100 percent!"). Picture book sharing is a powerful language tool for infant teachers.

Make books so precious that your little ones will absolutely hunger for book reading! (Fontaine, 1985; Honig, 1985; Honig & Brophy, 1997). Start early, read with expression, share picture books with babies, and promote a pleasureful, intimate ambiance as you read daily with children. Provide pillows and mats so that children can stretch out and turn book pages for themselves and go through their favorite books.

Writing is often sparked by children's enjoying the "writing" in books. Cheer on children who begin to invent their own spelling. One kindergarten child illustrated his picture of horses grazing on a prairie, with the title: "Hrs lv hr" (horses live here). Writing with invented spelling is an early way to begin the process of connecting heard sounds with letters and to enrich children's pride as they finish a drawing or "sign" a dictated story (Fields & Lee, 1987).

Remember that your primary goal is to create a positive passion for books. Make book sharing a socially satisfying activity for very young children. Read in varied ways. Sometimes children are in a more formal setting in a circle on a rug. Sometimes a child is cuddled in your lap, while others are leaning on you listening intently (and maybe sucking hard on a thumb to help them concentrate on what happens as the little engine chugs up the mountain to bring toys to boys and girls). Be sure to vary your voice tones to enhance children's emotional pleasure with the pictures and tales. Show your own joy as a child chimes in, comments, points to a picture, takes off on a story cheme (such as picking apples) and relates it to a home experience (helping mom make applesauce).

Choose books with internal rhythms and rhymes that enchant the children's ears while colorful pictures enchant their eyes.

Choose as many prosocial books as you can, such as "Hiawatha's kind heart"; " Two good friends"; "Something from nothing"; and Dr. Seuss' "Horton hears a who". These stories emphasize caring, sharing, and helpful kindness toward one another.

15. Sing!

Music and song offer possibilities for emotional connections that words alone cannot accomplish. Use songs to accompany gestures and actions. A habitually silent toddler with a grave face may well light up as he sways to "The eentsy beentsy spider" song. Hand out large squares of colorful sheer nylon so children can sway and create personal dances to slow romantic music. Play waltz music to finger paint by.

Sing songs with simple tonal progressions, such as:

Do - a deer a female deer,
Re - a little ray of sun;
Mi - a name I call myself,
Fa - a long long way to run.

Sing lullabies to soothe little ones into relaxation (Honig, 1995). Ask parents to contribute a lullaby from their own family or from their ethnic heritage. Nap time is easier when lullabies gently relax children into sleep.

Try major and minor scale progression singing as with the Pussy willow song, where each line is on one note and the next line starts one note higher than the previous line:

I have a little pussy,
Her coat is soft and grey,
She lives out in the meadow,
She'll never run away.
She'll always be a pussy,
She'll never be a cat
Cause she's a pussy willow,
Now what do you think of that!

Toddlers enjoy the brief vignettes of verses when their are gestures to accompany a song such as: "The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round. The wheels on the bus go round and round, all through the town."

Narrative story-songs fascinate children and hold their attention even when some of the words are archaic or a bit difficult. The melody helps sweep children along into the story:

"The fox went out on a chilly night. And he prayed for the moon for to give him light. For he had many a mile to go that night, Before he reached the town O, town O, town O. He had many a mile to go that night, before he reached the town O!"

Or : "Hush little baby, don't say a word,
Papa's going to buy you a mocking bird"
If that mocking bird won't sing,
Papa's going to buy you a diamond ring."

16. Enliven Spontaneous Dramatic Play.

Actively, but not intrusively, help young children to extend their dramatic play themes and ideas for roles so that no children are excluded or marginalized (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) For social role plays, provide lots of props. Dolls, blankets, toy kitchen furniture, empty food cartons and boxes, juice cans, dress-up clothes, and toy telephones promote more elaborations on themes during pretend play.

Be alert if a preschooler caries out only limited rigid roles (monster play every day, for example) rather than imaginative, creative roles. Provide multicultural dolls, assorted teddy bears, toy beds and blankets for tender nurturing play. Encourage expansion of familiar role playing of family scenarios. Guide and support early interactive role play between friends. Even one year-old friends giggle and say "run run" (with hardly decipherable articulation, of course!) as they delightedly take turns chasing one another in and out of a cardboard playhouse. Think about how

you will handle repetitive play using violent TV superhero themes. How can you encourage imagination and fantasy play and yet discourage "pretend" violence in the classroom?

17. Help Children Use Words As Social Mediators.

Teach children politeness words that calm down fusses and struggles between children: "I'm sorry I bumped into you." "You can have your turn now to play with the cars." "Please can I use your blue crayon?" "Thank you." Friendly words and phrases help ease the transition from social squabbles to more peaceful peer play, even for toddlers with limited "telegraphic speech".

Words serve as mental tools that facilitate a child's concept learning (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). Teachers provide manageable challenges in eliciting words from young children:

. "What animal is that? What sound does it make?"
. "How many mittens do you need for your hands? Well, first show me and tell me how many hands you have. Yes. You have two hands. Now tell me how many mittens you will need for your two hands?"

When a toddler is working with assorted blocks or a toy such as a ring stack set, be sure to use labels such as big and little. These "Contrast" or "Polar opposite" words help toddlers become aware of differences. They can concentrate better on the different ring sizes as they try pushing them down on the ring stack pole. Toddlers love learning "polar opposites". Preschoolers enjoy verbal games of thinking up the opposite to such concepts as: sweet, heavy, dark, wet, quiet, cold, skinny, bumpy, hard, short, above, in front of, tall, or empty.

18. Teach Time, Space, And Number Words.

Physics and math are integral parts of a preschool curriculum. Preschoolers love to measure, pour, compare, and count (even when they count out of numerical order, as they so frequently do!)

Talk about what you will do with the children after lunch, or before naptime or soon, or tomorrow or when you have finished a particular activity.

Set up cubes or checkers into a long pretend choo-choo train on a table and talk about the "first" car, the "middle" car, the last car or "caboose". Which car becomes the last one if you decide to start counting checkers from the opposite end of the line?

19. Recite poetry.

Art, dance, music, poetry! The ancient Greek muses still offer their gifts of aesthetic beauty to all of us and their gifts

of beauty propel children into language. Watch the awe and joy on a toddler's face as he squeals " Shishy!" in delighted homage to the graceful fanning, flicking tail of a large goldfish swimming in a tank. Poetic language weaves an ecstatic sense of the magic of words. Little children feel the magic in cadences, metric schemes, and poetic rhythms and rhymes.

Poetry's tongue-twisting-turns delight and capture the fancy of very young children as in Pooh Bear's poem: "The more it SNOWS, Tiddley-pom, the more it GOES on SNOWing!"

Poems that use a lot of onomatopoeia (think of the buzzy busy bee!) appeal to children. Create your own sound clashing, sonorous poetic fragments (Gable, 1999). For example, share a picture of a large green frog and poetically chant "Look at the slippery wet, slithery, squirmy, squishy frog!"

Absurdities in poems such as the quirky rhymes in "The Sheriff of Rottingham" tickle children's sense of humor.

20. Teach Finger Plays and Chants.

Play finger games that accompany chants such as "Pat a cake, pat a cake, baker's man" and "Open, close them!". Finger plays and chants capture children's attention because of the cadence of your voice, the cumulative word repetitions, and the accompanying interesting simple, slow gestures.

Use repetitive numerical chants with hand gestures such as "Five little monkeys jumping on the bed. One fell off and bumped his head!" Toddlers love the naughtiness of the monkeys and they chime in for the verbal countdown progression as each monkey in turn jumps on the bed and falls off.

CONCLUSIONS

Tailor your assistance to each child's individual level in language enrichment programming. Promote the use of language as a rich and integral accompaniment to play, to routine chores, such as diapering, feeding, toileting, shepherding, soothing, choosing materials, and daily living experiences as well as in special learning experience sessions. Conjure the joys of book reading time, the love of singing songs, the pleasure in social talk. The language mastery experiences you provide will ensure that your children become language lovers as well as eloquent language learners.

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